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U.S. orders 55 Soviet envoys out of country

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WASHINGTON — The United States yesterday ordered 55 Soviet diplomats to leave the country by the end of the month, saying all of them were involved in espionage.

It was the largest peacetime action of its kind in U.S. diplomatic history, taken at a time when top administration officials said they were attempting to rescue arms control agreements from the collapsed Reykjavik summit conference.

U.S. government experts on Soviet affairs said that the expulsions were bound to bring retaliation from Moscow, and that President Reagan would be likely to strike back in that event, with the eventuality of still further Soviet countermoves.

"We would hope that it does not interfere with progress made at Iceland, and that we can continue to seek arms control and other agreements with the Soviet Union," said White House spokesman Larry Speakes.

In its initial public reaction to the expulsion order, the Soviet government had its news agency Tass state that "the Reagan administration has taken another step aimed at worsening Soviet-American relations."

Earlier, Gennady Gerasimov, spokesman for the Soviet Foreign Ministry, told reporters in Moscow that "if the American side will insist on continuing this game of tit-for-tat, this can go on indefinitely."

Mr. Gerasimov's comments were made before the Soviet charge d'affaires in Washington, Oleg Sokolov, had been summoned to the State Department to be told of the expulsions by Thomas W. Simons Jr., a deputy assistant secretary of state.

U.S. officials said the president decided on the mass ouster Monday as a response to Moscow's announcement over the weekend that five U.S. diplomats were being ordered out of the Soviet Union for activities "incompatible with their official status," an expression customarily used in diplomacy to mean spying.

State Department spokesman Charles Redman said the Soviets "being expelled . . . are persons we have reason to believe have engaged in activities inconsistent with their diplomatic status."

"All 55?" a reporter asked.

"The 55," Mr. Redman said.

The present dispute arises from a U.S. note to the Soviets in March ordering a phased cutback of the Soviet Union's mission to the United Nations, to begin Oct. 1. The United States said that normal U.N. business didn't justify a mission that large and that many of the Soviets in it were spies.

When the Soviets appeared to balk at meeting the Oct. 1 deadline, the United States took the initiative, handing the Soviets a list of the men it wanted out. The last of them left the United States last week.

The Soviets, including Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze, warned of retaliation.

Mr. Redman said the Soviets were told last month that if they retaliated by expelling U.S. diplomats in Moscow, the United States would act immediately on a recent law to put Soviet and American diplomat representation on an equal numerical footing. It was left up to the State Department when it would implement the new requirement.

For the Soviets that meant big cuts.

Until now, the Soviets have been authorized 320 diplomats accredited to the United States, divided between the embassy in Washington and the consulate in San Francisco.

The United States has 251 diplo-

mates in the Soviet Union, 225 at the embassy and 26 at the consulate in Leningrad.

From now on, Mr. Redman said, the sides will be equal.

"The United States advised the Soviet Union this morning of a number of steps designed to respond to the Soviet expulsion of five U.S. diplomats and to ensure that from this point forward the Soviet diplomatic representation in Washington and San Francisco will be based on the principle of strict equality in numbers with our counterpart representations in Moscow and Leningrad," Mr. Redman said.

He said the Soviets were told that as a result "50 Soviet Embassy and Consulate employees . . . will be obliged to depart the United States" and that they "have been identified by name."

To complete the reduction to 251, another 19 Soviet diplomatic posts, currently unfilled, would be abolished. This would involve no departures of Soviet personnel.

Finally, Mr. Redman said, "as a result of the recent Soviet action of

expelling five U.S. diplomats, an additional four members of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, and one member of the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco, are declared persona non grata, and must depart the United States by Nov. 1."

Mr. Redman identified the five as Vasily Fedotov, embassy counselor; Nikolai Kokovin, embassy attache; Oleg Likhachev, embassy counselor; Alexander Metelkin, embassy counselor; and Lev Zaytsev, consul in San Francisco.

Mr. Redman said Mr. Fedotov and his four colleagues could be replaced by other Soviet diplomats, but the rest couldn't.

"We have repeatedly warned the Soviets — most recently when we expelled 25 named officials from the Soviet U.N. mission in September — that we would not tolerate the abuse of their U.N. mission as a safe haven for espionage activities," he said.

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"Moreover, when we expelled the 25 in response to their abuse of the U.N. mission, we indicated that we would not tolerate actions against our diplomatic missions. There is no counterpart U.S. presence in the U.S.S.R. to the Soviet U.N. mission," he said.

Administration officials said the president had chosen among a list of options, including a less severe retaliation recommended by the State Department.

At the beginning of the week, senior State Department officials were hoping that the United States and the Soviet Union would be able to revive some of the agreements reached in principle at the Reykjavik summit between President Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

One official said that "barring a political accident," Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze could get these agreements ready for a summit conference in Washington near the end of the year.

With yesterday's action, a diplomat said, "It's much less certain."

